Radical Queers and Class Struggle:
A Match to Be Made



Segment of an article which appears as a chapter in the 2012 anthology Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire edited by C.B. Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano and takes up themes of radical queer politics and anti-capitalism.

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While radical queers identifying with anarchism, anti-authoritarianism, and/or anticapitalism seem to be on the upswing, there exists a profound misunderstanding of class struggle within radical queer circles and a lack of class analysis that hurts both specifically queer analyses and anticapitalism as a whole. Let's face it, the task is not to "queer" anarchism, which has become a signifier for every countercultural, edgy activist project out there, to the point where it now has as little shared meaning among radicals as queer does in the radical milieu. The task is for radical queers to become class struggle militants. We need to be constantly conscious of moving toward a holistic queer praxis, one that examines the conditions of the lives of all queers, and also that locates those lives in the larger context of the struggles of all workers and all the oppressed. This is not only a position of solidarity and a refusal to leave other queers behind, but it is also the realization that queer liberation is inextricably tied with the self-emancipation of the working class.

Queers, like other oppressed groups, are hit particularly hard by capitalism, and this is especially true of the queers most often erased, ignored, or left behind by queer and feminist movements: queers of color, trans and gender-nonconforming people, queers with disabilities; and queer sex workers are some examples. Many queer anarchists and other anticapitalists come from anti-oppression backgrounds, and, while analysis in anti-oppression circles continues to improve and greater understandings and explications of intersectionality continue to be the case in those circles, a good, critical anti-oppression analysis is not enough. We need to be both anticapitalists and to understand how capitalism functions to truly understand the conditions of the lives of the working class, from those struggling against multiple systems of oppression to the "middle class" existing in a position of (far too often temporary) comfort in the suburbs. Through this understanding of class struggle, we can contribute to mass movements for collective liberation.

Without this understanding of class struggle, our critique of the state can only be both flawed and limited; we must have an understanding of class struggle to see the state as an instrument of the domination of one class over all other classes and our anti-state project as the need to destroy the bourgeois state as inseparable from the project of abolishing all classes. It is a social and not an antisocial project. To paraphrase Kropotkin, we want no rulers, not no rules, and failing to acknowledge class struggle leads to a view of the state as an independent institution, not as an instrument of class rule. Also this can lead to a glorification of antisocial acts as some sort of resistance to the state, when in reality they are juvenile, futile, and reactionary. Unlike Leninists, we neither want to seize the state nor even to replace it with a "proletarian" state. We know that if classes remain after the revolution, and there is the need for a hegemonic governing body separate from the people to maintain social relations, then the revolution has failed. However, many queers come to anticapitalist movements retaining liberal ideas about class and how capitalism functions, treating class as just another way someone can be oppressed or privileged, rather than a relationship to the means of production that is continually re-created. Applying an antioppression analysis to class becomes problematic in many ways. It causes us to continue to use the definitions of class that the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) use for us, that serves to split the working class and convince members of it to act against their own class interests. It prevents us from articulating how and why some queers are hit so hard by capitalism, and results in us far too often ignoring the struggles of trans people, for instance, and rephrasing them in terms of people being voluntary "drop outs," as if the state of being "middle class" was an immutable, inherited thing rather than a term created to get portions of the working class to side with capital against other workers.

The solution to these issues, of course, is educating ourselves about class struggle, and capitalism, and to see the movement for queer liberation as both indispensably a part of the struggle of the working class and indispensable to that struggle.

A standard practice from anti-oppression circles is writing a list of oppressions that we oppose, and oftentimes "classism" is included in that list. Leaving aside the fact that the lists are, by necessity, incomplete, capitalism is a structure of a different sort from white supremacy or heteropatriarchy, for instance. We do not seek to cease to engage in practices we currently call queer in undoing heteropatriarchy; however, the goal of anticapitalist struggle must be the negation of first the capitalist class (through seizing the means of production), and the subsequent negation of the working class, as the exploitation of labor ends with control over both one's labor and the necessities of life, the abolition of property, and the socialization of the means of production. To struggle for any less than this is to struggle only against class elitism, to merely want the rich to treat us better, for the lives of the poor to not be so hard. This is not the sum of our desires. We want a world without rich and poor, and it's time our analysis, our organizing, and our actions reflected that!

Furthermore, due to the analysis of class carried over from liberal or reformist analyses, there is the tendency to use accusations of classism to maintain divisions within the working class, to silence, erase, or render the marginalized powerless, and to invisibilize a wide variety of the experiences of queer people. And these all draw upon flawed analyses of class. The post–World War II restructuring of the working class, particularly in the post-industrial world, has lead to ever greater levels of education in the working class, and greater employment in the service sector and technical jobs. Meanwhile, many stereotypical assembly-line jobs have moved to the developing world or been replaced by machines. Not only do sociological definitions of class that are based on old stereotypes about education and work performed conceal social relations, they obscure the reality of the proletariat in the post-industrial world. Furthermore, presumptions about who is a "true prole" and what "true proles" are intellectually capable of both insult those who do blue-collar work, and serve to either implant anti-intellectualism into mass movements or to maintain intellectual labor as the specialized domain of academics.

Also, with the increasing privatization of education and the rapidly rising costs of both public and private higher education, student debt is becoming an increasingly large factor in proletarian struggle, and pretending that a mythical "middle class" exists, composed of everyone outside the increasingly scarce assembly-line worker, cuts us off from a variety of important terrains of struggle. Too often, our discussions of class turn into a competition over whose childhood was harder rather than figuring out how we're going to liberate ourselves. And while there are real socioeconomic differences between various groups within the working class, we cannot let that obscure our analysis of the class as a whole.

To overcome this infighting, flawed analysis, and erasure, we need a truly anticapitalist analysis of class. We need to understand capitalism as creating a class system based on relationship to the means of production, and understand that an essential component of working-class struggle on the way to destroying capitalism is to win day-to-day struggles, such as less hours, greater pay, safer and more comfortable work environments, in so much as those things reduce the amount of value the capitalist class extracts from us and can be won directly, without mediation. Another goal of day-to-day struggle is to create and maintain effective self-organization. Winning these intermediate struggles does not take workers out of the working class, and can (and must, if we, the working class, are to liberate ourselves) serve both to improve the conditions we are struggling from and also build our capacity and ability to struggle by encouraging our self-organization as a class. It is foolish to buy into the same logic that the capitalist class uses to divide us against ourselves.

Another flaw of this sociological/liberal analysis of class as just another oppression is that it is the first step in breaking our solidarity with the entire proletariat. When we view class as a way that the poor are oppressed and that the so-called middle class and the capitalists are privileged (with the capitalists merely more privileged than the middle class), we inevitably fall into arguments of who is "working class enough"; did the queer who grew up in a single-parent home in poverty cease to be working class when she worked her way through school and became a teacher? Is the struggle of a trans person who is unable to get steady work under capitalism illegitimate due to the fact that tl grew up in a two-parent household in the suburbs? Do we write off cis straight whit workers due to their being "too privileged" to be in the same struggle as us? Do whi queers continue to fetishize people of color, conflating race with class, without an a of how capitalism constructed and maintains racism? We cannot resolve these questions within queer anarchist circles while retaining an analysis of class drawn from an anti-oppression politics grounded in sociology or liberalism.

The most serious flaw, however, by putting class merely on the level of an oppression, is failing to have the realization, to paraphrase Marx, that the workers are the ones with radical chains; the exploitation of the working class is the entire basis of the system we want to destroy, and it is only by identifying, struggling against, and destroying those chains that any of us can be liberated. Once we realize that we can begin to understand how stratification based on race, gender, and sexuality were built into the working class as a means of control and hyperexploitation and as the midwife to capitalism's birth.